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Philosophy, Literature, and Laughter: Notes on an Ontology of the Moment

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There is an initial difficulty which merits acknowledgment at the outset of this inquiry. In philosophy, all categories are weighted toward reflection and away from spontaneity. It is hard to envision a philosophy of laughter, notwithstanding Bergson's familiar efforts to categorize the comic, or Nietzsche's provocations lauding caprice. Philosophical discourse has been solidly and traditionally anchored in eternal concerns far from the madding eruption of laughter--the sound of frolic signifying nothing. The characteristic philosophical disdain for, and obsession with escape from: the momentary, the pleasurable, the distraction of the body and temptations of the senses, the seduction of, and abandonment to the embrace of, emotion--all of this argues against any profitable inquiry into the domain of laughter.

Literature is a more promising resource for the expression and understanding of laughter. Even though its bias and signifying depth may be anchored to tragic drama, literature embraces affirmation in all its forms, including the diversities which laughter lends. Fiction takes into itself and makes its own whatever issues from the surrounding discourse of life. Literature, in this instance, and in this way, has an advantage over critical philosophy which has a traditional stake in the serious leverage of logic rather than in the license or allowance of levity. Philosophy may find it a useful exercise, for example, to outline those conditions under which laughter is inappropriate, in which sensibility or humanity is properly offended, and thus try to legislate the moral boundaries which laughter must observe. Although one can imagine philosophy producing an aesthetic or ethical commentary on the use and abuse of laughter, laughter remains an unlikely category for significant philosophical attention.

What might at first appear an exception to this is the occasional humor that finds a home in discourse--invariably a species of intellectual and didactic humor--which sustains a critical edge: in the irony of Socrates, the satire of Swift, the parodies of Voltaire, or more recently in Wittgenstein, where the lurking humor implicit in the play of grammatical jokes is designed to display the nonsense attending some misleading analogy at the heart of a philosophical thesis. But laughter is a different matter entirely. One can recall in Aristotle, and then in

Epicurean and Stoic writing, a focused concern to counsel against the ugly contortions and bad form of the unbridled in all its manifestations, particularly in the indulgent exuberance and public display of laughter. Laughter in its unstructured freedom has seemed alien and antithetical to the studied discipline which constitutes philosophy.

On the Nature of Laughter

It still seems possible and meaningful to attempt something of an account of laughter, relevant to Socrates' founding paradigm in the pursuit of wisdom--the discovery of how one is to live well. A life of laughter may be a *reductio ad absurdum* of a hedonism gone berserk, but the occasion of laughter may also be of some consequence in understanding human life. To that end, we may make a few tentative notes toward an ontology of laughter: what is the name and nature of this utterly human thing?

Whatever else it may or may not be, laughter is manifestly a release, however brief, from time, from law, from obligation, from sense and sensibility, from suffering and death, indeed from the felt burdens of life which are the normal calling and normative substance of philosophical analysis. Even Nietzsche's enthusiasm toward whatever is new and "life furthering" contains the reminder that it is only after long and arduous denial and restrained conformity over an extended period of time that a discipline and knowledge emerges sufficient to accomplish whatever is "higher" in culture, art, and science. Fortunately, Nietzsche's thought is developmental, and he follows the above declarations of the tedium of cultural obedience with the reminder of the eventual and pressing need for creative release from the burdens of the cultural past. The congenital problem of modern philosophers is that they are born late, born old, born *epigoni* with the clutter of centuries of facts and assurances about what is so, what ought to be done, and how. Therefore an imperative task develops for a new generation which must find and fashion a break point of freedom from this constraint, must develop an ethics of "caprice". Nietzsche does not quite, but might well, remark that what is necessary in the present age is the liberating abandon of laughter.

It may be instructive at this juncture to follow the logic of Nietzsche's familiar metaphor of "the three metamorphoses of the spirit" in which Man (the new and creative thinker) must first become a camel, then a lion, and finally a child. The cultural animal must first take on and bear the weight of the wisdom which constitutes his past, must then be transformed into that being capable of rejecting

wisdom and of affirming his own vision, and then be transformed one final time into the creative being of the child. The *telos* of this metamorphosis is a being who is not shackled with all the truths and prohibitions which informed those who are no longer alive. Nor is the child saddled with the negative courage of strength that was needed to reject the received truth of the revered orthodoxies.

Nietzsche's forceful allegory will at least indicate the direction I intend to take the following remarks on the cultural imperative and philosophical point of laughter. His metaphor of moments in the creative transformation of both person and peoples registers the fact that the rivers we cross are never the same, that each new day brings its own needs, and the need of its own truths. How is laughter involved in this? It begins in the sweeping release from all that has preceded, from everything that has built up into whatever constrains and restrains: the force of reason and logic, the binding morality of experience and tradition, the sacred sense of that for which parents and patriots have lived and died. Laughter is a sudden mode which cleans the slate--golden age or fretted future disappear in the moment.

Theories

As a phenomenon, laughter is notoriously difficult to explain--it resists the clear and insistent boundaries of theory. There seems to be nothing at which human beings do not laugh, no one thing at which they all **do** laugh, and nothing appears common in those things which by common consent provoke the peal of laughter. Hence the cause of laughter, apart from the mechanics and dynamics of a biochemical trigger, remains a puzzle, if not a mystery. There exists a long history of attempts to give reasons for laughter; however, the general consensus of this history--the logic of laughter summerized, for example, in D. Monroe's *The Argument of Laughter* (Notre Dame 1963)--is that laughter is best and most easily understood as a **release from restraint**. This "universal" constant holds true in the diverse literature from Aristotle to Freud, with variations mainly depending on which side of the laughter one stands. These discoveries of theory, however, seem to add little to the intuitions and experience of popular conception and opinion.

The purest form and expression of laughter--in its spontaneity-- comes to presence in the absence of any intent, where laughter is not directed or calculated to humiliate, censor, or correct, is not an act of callous rejection, cruelty, or accommodation. A great deal depends, in such cases, on which side of the butt of the laughter one resides: laugh-er or laugh-ee. The present inquiry is designed to investigate the possible philosophical import of laughter free from such extraneous

social or moral concerns. I will speak only to and about that laughter which is simple and 'innocent', or at least uncontrived and non-directed, which has no motive ulterior to the moment and occasion. I am aware that there is likely no empirical rule for deciding this in any particular case; I am interested only in the conceptual logic of the principle involved.

We do know something of the importance of innocent laughter to the health and longevity of individual life. A person who laughs (for whom laughter is an ever present possibility and frequent exercise in spontaneity) as a rule has less illness, physical or mental--but then, so do symphony conductors, and, for all I know, shoe salespersons. Facticity will not settle the issue. If laughter is intimately connected to health, and so to Plato's portrait of the good life, and to happiness, Aristotle's *telos* of human activity and well being, then we might well investigate this positive aspect and activity of laughter, not as release, merely, but as affirmation. We thus attain a positive and negative definition of laughter analogous to Kant's logical requirements of freedom from..and freedom for... If the *arche* of philosophy is the liberating task of a free and fully lived existence, and the *telos* of human activity is the spirit of its integration, where does laughter fit in? Given the admitted disjunction between levity and leverage discussed in the first part of this paper, it will not be an easy fit. But at some level the cultivation of life and the life of culture begin and end in the simple affirmation of the moment. Nietzsche somewhere declares that it is in the laughter of the gods that we imagine existence at its most free and real: laughter which overflows the boundaries of past and future, full throated sounds of privileged beings released from time and death, the very echos of which fill the moment to eternity. It is in laughter that we are most like the gods (those gods of the Greeks in which Nietzsche found so much celebration of life); it is in the capacity for laughter, and the sharing of that possibility, affirming existence, that gods and men are of one race.

In the concluding chapters of his *Encyclopedia*, Hegel set out the categories of the highest expression of the wholeness of ideal existence of which the (Absolute) Mind is capable: the works of Art, of Religion, and of Philosophy. In these workings of the *Geist* or Spirit the defining character of *aesthesos*, *ekstasis*, and *sophia* is formed. In these three culminating moments, the dialectic of existence is made whole: philosophical wisdom(*sophia*) is the artistic integration and realization of sensuous apprehension (*aesthesos*) , and the ecstatic revelation of religious truth (*ekstasis*). This view of philosophy is the ideal recognition that wisdom is a dialectical product of the aesthetic and the ecstatic, of the sensuous and the spiritual. Laughter, if we are to

locate it as a category and activity affirming existence, must partake of and celebrate both the sensuous and the spiritual; it must be a moment of convergence of the two, and in that way constitute an essential aspect of philosophy.

The Paradox of Laughter and Existence

The trick to understanding laughter may be to discover depth in the surface of things. It is common enough to acknowledge that in the beginning is the end, the blossom is in the seed, the mighty oak in the acorn gathered into the hand of a child. *Arche* and *telos* converge in existence. Put another way, in nature there is neither beginning nor end, no sharp edges of the discrete, of individuation. In the cultural activity of the arts, there is a similar phenomenon: tragic drama gives expression to the recognition that in pain there is beauty. In life as in literature, it is equally true that in laughter there is sorrow. The tragic and the comic both recognize and acknowledge that, in tears or laughter, this, too, shall pass and be forgotten like the rest. There is no possessing here, no conserving or hoarding; laughter can be no one's property, tears belong to no one's destiny. In nature there are no oppositions, and no necessary associations: if pain is inevitable, suffering is not. One often finds, in the critique of hedonism, reminders that even pain and pleasure are not exclusive in their opposition, nor comparable in their kind.

The same point can be made through an analysis of the dysanalogous complexities of happiness and pleasure. If pleasure is a sensation, happiness is better understood, in contrast, as an emotion, each marking a different level and domain of human experience. But we can as easily point out that if pain is a sensation invariably locatable (the pain is sharp or deep, in my elbow or my lower back), pleasure is not in this way even a sensation. Moreover, as Aristotle already made clear, happiness is best understood as a comprehensive human **activity**, not a state or emotion, and is certainly not exclusive of sorrow or pain. Even if we stay within the common boundaries of psychological analysis, the phenomenon of pleasure is at root a release from tension built up in the organism. Hence the pleasure of eating or of sex, however refined by the Epicurean aesthete, is only a release from the pangs of hunger or the craving of desire. The irony of hedonism is that the delight of pleasure is purchased by the prior pursuit of pain. This is problematic only for the pretensions of hedonism as an ethical theory. In existence, however, these are not two discrete movements requiring explanation, only the natural and integrated motion of a living organism.

We have already noted the measure of depth which literature discovers in tragic drama. In this fiction of terror and sorrow, suffering reaches into the cultural depths of the of the human condition. In exact parallel and counterpoint, and in resonance with this striven countenance of human frailty, it is in the release of laughter that we descry and acknowledge the reality of existence itself. It has sometimes seemed an embarrassment or offense that the actual performance of Greek tragic drama concluded not with the flawed self recognition and fall of the hero, but in fact followed the fragile and failed aspiration of human individuation with a robust celebration of life in the form of a Satyr play--the libidinous renewal and triumph of existence itself. If the cultural pretensions of the human mind have been leveled, no less is the spiritual return to the time of the sacrificial god ensured. Terror and pity give way to laughter and celebration: what cannot be made good or secure in the individual aspiration and heroic deeds of an individual is resolved through dissolution into the seasons and sharing cycles of life and death. In the larger perspective of existence, there is no difference in kind between life and death, tears and laughter. Thus at the heart of the tragic is laughter: this is a paradox of depth and surface, life in death, that may equally mock the pretensions of a systematic philosophy that would explain everything, or of a skeptical philosophy that would dismiss everything. Fortunately the creative core of fictive literature in tragic drama can express and celebrate this paradox without the obligation of overcoming it.

To give the logocentric devil its due, there has always existed within critical philosophy a germ of recognition that the secret of existence lies somewhere beyond the limits of cognitive reflection. Such revelation is implicit or explicit from Plato to Wittgenstein. In the *Symposium* (as it were, Plato's satyr play), the disruptive revelry and boisterous entrance and character of Alcibiades is both an historical and dramatic reminder of the sound and fury of existence just beyond, held in fragile abeyance by the rational civility of Socratic discourse. In similar concession, the positive recantations of Wittgenstein's later *Philosophical Investigations* testify that once we have said all that can be said in science and philosophy and are so condemned to silence, there is more in the remaining silence than was dreamt of in the philosophies of the *Timaeus* or *Tractatus*. In any genuine contest between rationality, civility, and raw existence, laughter will prevail.

Lessons in the Purity of Laughter: Resolution of Paradox in the Moment

The raveling I want to tether in an analysis of paradox is the idea that in laughter there is a purity of acceptance and unerring affirmation of existence. There are brief moments in one's life when and wherein existence resolves into laughter; it is in those moments that we become whole, free, sane, and fully alive. Beings in time, we are loosed from the fetters of time. In the instant and instance of laughter, past and future vanishes, and nothing leads up to or away from this moment. You did not plan it, you cannot preserve it. As difficult as it is to stop a moment ("It goes by so fearfully fast," said the King, "you might as well try to stop a Bandersnatch"), so is it impossible to preserve laughter. It materializes in the moment and dissolves, but it is a phenomenon of the moment which is complete in itself. In its resolution, we become creatures of the moment, which is to say, paradoxically, of the eternal. In this abrupt unfolding into eternity, time no longer holds us green or dying, no longer are we creatures lazing under the apple bough nor chained in song to the sea. In the clarity of its arrest we are, as without assent, taken over with laughter--it bursts from our lungs as if it had been waiting, straining all the while. We are no longer in control of the moment, and in that is our freedom. This involition is the opposite of moral freedom: here there is no highly wrought autonomy, no achievement of the will or imperative of character; rather, the practical will is obliterated in a paroxysm.

In an important sense, Kant was right in giving the sensuous universal its own separate *Critique*, and right also in his intuition that the conceptual meeting ground of pure and practical reason is the non-imperative acknowledgment of aesthetic "judgment". One can only express wonder that human sensibility converges in beauty, or again, in laughter. Plato's *Symposium* is a hymn to the same order of recognition we find in Kant's *Third Critique*. In a very different vein Hegel, too, believes that it is in the capacity for tears and laughter that the Spirit in man finds the means to express itself in the world, and reciprocally, that the Spirit of the world finds expression in man. Tears and laughter form a clear and final judgment of the significance of events in the world, form a response to the world that is the indelible imprint of the kind of existence we are..."how in action like an angel...in apprehension like a god...this paragon of animals...this quintessence of dust."

Freedom and necessity converge in laughter, compose the elements and occasion for it. Thought and feeling do not merely collapse into mind and mood, but mind and body collapse into spirit. Laughter is not the synthesis of a dialectic of mediation, but a spontaneous emanation, a healing of the conceptual rifts of mind/body, thought/feeling, subject/object, self/other. The philosophical

superstructure simply collapses, not under the weight of understanding or the leverage of analysis, but in the spontaneous combustion of existence.

Laughter and the Ontology of the Moment

The central philosophical point to these notes is that the logic of laughter is such that the illusions of difference between mind and matter, self and other, appearance and reality, essence and existence--all the strain of dichotomized faculties and the angst of alienation and estrangement--simply collapse under their own weight. The reflex of laughter explodes the reflect of mind. The mirror of nature shatters and there is only existence, a spirit rejoicing in a moment of self-affirmation which excludes nothing.

I am aware that these are untimely notes, in a time which remains out of joint, out of sorts, and short on humor. Neither am I confident there is something one can do with a piece of insightful outsidership. There is, in this understanding of the matter, no building block of theory which will bring laughter under the purview of anything else. My sense about the philosophical placement of the category of laughter is more on the order of an obverse to a sensible response to evil. In the latter case, we can do no more than bear witness to a fact, and acknowledge a primal reality which we may resist but not command or destroy. Laughter is the other side of the conceptual coin: we may joyfully celebrate and participate in the reality of the moment, and that is the end of it. All the wisdom fashioned in life, literature, and philosophy awaken us to such moments, and we realize, in the wake of history and against the accumulated weight of the world, that these moments in which we are moved to tears and laughter are precious. Moments do not hold life in bondage, but their occasion ensures that neither death nor evil hold dominion. Such moments come as they will, and not as we will, although we are not powerless in pursuing possible situations in which these moments come to life. In the end, it is not knowledge or goodness or beauty which justify existence: it is only existence which can do that, and one of its arguments is the sound of laughter.

These notes are offered as familiar versions not synoptic visions. They are revisions of earlier versions gone awry. It may be better, from the standpoint of experience, to regale with laughter ("A funny thing happened on the way to the library....") than to review with grammar, but, for better or worse, philosophy has no such modalities. Even so, the topic of laughter may now look closer to certain features of philosophical orthodoxy. Laughter occurs at the interstices between freedom and compulsion. Like freedom, laughter loses its life in possession. Like

love, laughter can only exist in its exercise; also like love, it has a compelling nature of its own, and like loving, laughter can only exist in its own freedom. The parity of laughter is fragile in a similar way: the intrigue of intention, however well meant, will destroy it. Alive, laughter is lightness and light carried on the air; it cannot be bottled or boxed. In point of contrast, the offense of sound track laughter spliced to the dead antics of taped television comedy comes to mind.

We have seen that it is not difficult to say from what restraints and constraints laughter frees us. We are released from the ancient demons of the human condition of contingency: from time, troubles, plurality, scarcity, from the consciousness of pain and dying, from the responsibilities of promises and obligations, from the authority of truth and reason. It is less easy to decide, and perhaps as pointless to try to determine, what it is we are released **into** through laughter, other than into the moment, which, complete in itself and however briefly, opens into eternity. This is not, in any traditional sense, religious eternity--the fullness of time and the promised reward of the faithful. On the other hand, the **ontology** of faith, as spiritual realization, may be understood in and as the fullness of the moment in which all else is reduced to nothingness. In this sense the passion of faith and the release of laughter share something fundamental and essential to human existence. The eternal, in either case, may be understood as the absolute fullness of the moment itself. As such, laughter, no less than faith, embraces the whole of existence.

We have not quite come full circle in this essay so that we can claim a clearer idea of where we began. Laughter is made no closer to the usual rational requisites of philosophical reflection or deliberation. Laughter is, and remains, unquestionably an affair of the moment. What I have tried to show is the vital consequence for existence which is met in a moment, so that the reality of a life may in some ways be measured in just such moments, no longer distanced from or placed in judgment of existence. Philosophy, here, has less to teach than more to learn.